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Creativity and precarity, from New Labour to Alt-Labour

Angela McRobbie

Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries

Oxford: Polity, 2016, £16.99 (ISBN: 9780745661957) 224pp

Nicole S. Cohen

Writers' Rights: Freelance Journalism in a Digital Age

Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2016, £24.99 (ISBN: 9780773547964)

336pp

Angela McRobbie's *Be Creative* and Nicole Cohen's *Writers' Rights* together tell a transatlantic story of cultural policy, social democracy, and organised labour in an age of precariousness. Their genealogies of conflicts and tensions undergirding the creative economy in Europe and North America both stake bold claims for old ways of doing things against claims of futures past and present. Cohen explores new ways of contesting exploitation and commodification among precarious freelance writers in Canada and North America, McRobbie the policies and practices that support autonomous social enterprise and creative work in the UK and Europe. Each book situates what is new and specific about contemporary cultural labour within a wider context that calls into question the ascription of endless novelty found in some mainstream and critical accounts of precarious work in the creative economy.

For Cohen, this draws from a critical appropriation of labour process theory (LPT) (46-7). LPT has consistently acted as an effective bulwark against prescriptive assumptions of novelty in contemporary capitalism by highlighting the persistence of certain workplace conditions and relations. However, this tenacious defence of the

workplace as the sole site of study and struggle can sometimes miss what makes capitalism historically specific irrespective of the immediate experience and practice of work (110-112). This specificity consists not in productive activity itself but its bookends. Preconditioning work before it has even begun is the class antagonism which sees one pole dispossessed of all but the means to sell its capacity to labour- a precarious relationship rooted in social reproduction as much as production. Moreover, determining the abstract and alienating experience and practice of work are the historically specific commodified forms assumed by the products of labour under capitalist social relations.

In line with this, Cohen identifies shifts in the changing shape of the media commodity as the arbiter of changes in the labour process (96). The internet has acted as a technological means to render written media a canvas for the creation and consumption of commodified opportunities to sell advertising space. The content shorter, simpler and shorn of meaning in pursuit of hits, the apparently irreducible human creativity of the freelance writer finds itself harried by the threat of automation (44-5, 145-149). There is nothing intrinsic to the work that renders it ripe for technological unemployment. Rather, the increased likelihood of automation issues from the commodity end. Technology, in this account, moves through commodified social forms and constitutive social relations, by no means the determining or utopian force popular narratives would have us believe (143-145, 243). In response, Cohen proposes an expansive terrain of struggle that focuses not only on the content of labour but its form, opening out upon the 'terms of commodification' under which freelance writing is parcelled out and pressure placed on writers to produce certain kinds of output (52-4). The understanding of employment as embedded within antagonisms that occupy not only the labour process

but the spheres of reproductive and circulatory activity that both precede and arise from it complicates simplistic political appeals to work or its escape as solve-alls for the problems of precariousness. This exposes precariousness as irreducible to shifts in working life alone, that logically and historically precedes the compulsion to labour itself and must be fought as such.

McRobbie, too, puts precarious creative work in its proper place within a wider social and historical perspective. McRobbie's critical interlocutor is the increasingly influential current of Italian postoperaismo. McRobbie highlights the same weaknesses in postoperaismo Cohen locates in LPT: namely, a focus on immediate changes in production in abstraction from their wider political-economic context in social reproduction and circulation. McRobbie makes the astute point that postoperaist thinkers like Hardt and Negri remain wedded to a disavowed masculinist productivism that exaggerates paradigmatic shifts in capitalism from immediate changes in the practice and experience of certain kinds of work and worker (94, 95, 100, 157). Labour, here, is suggested as characteristic of capitalism, and not the radical situation of precariousness that compels us to labour in the first place nor the specific forms assumed by its results.

To the postoperaist posing of endless novelty both McRobbie and Cohen counterpose a reconnection with past traditions of struggle and political action. McRobbie stresses an intergenerational perspective that respects the transhistorical resonances of the contemporary freelance search for autonomy with that sought by past free spirits breaking loose of class constraints. She emphasises the political potential of a 'familial/community' ethos that, far from the parasitical valorisation of youth enacted in both capitalism and the 'postcapitalist' dreams it permits, seeks to establish solidarity

across generations based on common experiences of working life. This chimes with Cohen's concern to return to the old concepts of a Marxian critical vocabulary to understand the precariousness of freelance creative work not as something of recent vintage, but a persistent and constitutive feature of capitalist labour itself. And, as McRobbie makes clear, the exposure of contradictory continuities undergirding apparent paradigm shifts demands a return to old ways of organising on the ground, as well as old ways of building, from the ground up, policy platforms that can plan into existence practical alternatives through slow reformist experimentation.

Where McRobbie calls for a return to social democratic policy solutions to precariousness for which continental Europe currently carries the flame, Cohen communicates the continuing imperative for precarious workers to seek collective bargaining agreements with employers, the struggle of freelancers to establish closed shops and the class conflict concealed in the legal niceties of contractual terms and conditions. New models of what Cohen calls 'alt-labour' create alternative ways of supporting and securing the social reproduction of precarious workers. The term captures in shorthand 'organizations that mobilize and represent workers who under law cannot access trade unions for the purpose of collective bargaining' (185). They exhibit a specific emphasis on 'cushion[ing] the risk and costs of self-employment' where employer or state social protections are unavailable. At their best, such initiatives generate new infrastructures of social reproduction that, as McRobbie captures, chime with how organised labour traditionally went beyond the workplace to afford 'communal, familial, collective or...institutional spaces' wherein 'alternative working lives could be imagined' (58).

Elsewhere, this 'alt-labour' takes on the superficially less radical guise of a networked guild or craft unionism harnessing the internet to erect new barriers circumscribing from scratch a previously non-existent professionalism with the attendant prestige and protections this offers. Whilst in McRobbie 'New Labour' looms large, she outlines a second such 'new' labour representing those 'for whom work has become an important source of self-actualization, even freedom and independence' (19), specifically in the creative and cultural industries and in 'freelance, casualized and project-based' contractual arrangements. Even while their conditions and aspirations apparently contradict those of the traditional labour movement, McRobbie suggests, 'the sublimated spirit' of that tradition 'lives on in the lines of flight' this 'new labour' interest traces in its 'desires for creative and rewarding work', and the 'continuity' that consists between earlier struggles and the 'contemporary tensions' afflicting the 'new culture industries' (42).

These guild-style infrastructures of support tend to service individual needs, not collective outcomes – for instance, using social networks to source job opportunities, or pooling profiles for potential clients to browse when they need a freelancer. In this, they respond to imperatives foisted upon them by policy. In the policy shift from independence to freelancing McRobbie identifies a 'second wave' of creative 'entrepreneurs' unmoored from the 'small-scale economies' of traditional small business formerly supported by 'the infrastructures of the state', and left to float footloose and fancy-free on the sea of precarious self-employment (28-29, 35, 45). As Cohen notes, this often resembles a recoding of what remains work as something else entirely, closer to owners of small businesses dispensing with services to a series of clients, concealing the dependence

inherent in the employment relation and removing the requirement upon the state to afford legal protections to those involved (10, 172).

Cohen is circumspect about the transformation undergone by the worker in this process of organisation, who comes out a professional on a falsely equal footing with editors and publishers, liquidating the capital-labour relation (173). The consequent 'cordiality' between freelance writers and their clients is cited by Cohen as evidence of the quashing of the class antagonism, obscuring the real relations at play (230-1). However, in a complementary if contradictory understanding of the opportunities of precisely such a 'craft' identity as that espoused by those in Cohen's case study, McRobbie gives us a way of reading this kind of professionalising activity as itself a means of revolt. In so doing, McRobbie conceptualises a recuperation of work through craft.

Both Cohen and McRobbie toy at points with the post-work 'refusal of work' mantra that today occupies broadsheet thinkpieces under the banner of the basic income and full automation. However, whereas Cohen only touches upon this in her concluding remarks (245-7), for McRobbie the rubric of refusal is productively undermined throughout by means of a focus on work's ordinariness lacking in the growing literature that today advances its critique. For McRobbie work refusal is of a particular *kind* of work, to which we must respond by confronting contradictions utopian visions of a post-work future outsource to free machines and free money. In this context, both books serve as vital attempts to reckon with a new world of work shorn of easy answers.